

## State, mining industry agree on plan to cut mercury

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A new program to regulate mercury emissions from Nevada gold mines was announced Thursday by the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection in an arrangement immediately attacked by environmentalists as a possible "sweetheart deal" with the mining industry.

The mandatory program is designed to reduce mercury emissions by requiring enhanced monitoring, testing, record keeping and reporting by all precious metal mining operations in the Silver State. The program's unveiling comes at a time when critics in Idaho and Utah are increasingly concerned that airborne emissions of mercury from Nevada gold mines pose a toxic threat across state lines.

The proposal, which still must be approved by the state Environmental Commission, "is the first regulatory program of its kind to control mercury emissions from precious metal mining," NDEP Administrator Leo Drosdoff said.

Russ Fields, executive director of the Nevada Mining Association, said the new program should boost the success of a voluntary mercury control program that has already resulted in major reductions in mercury emissions from Nevada's four largest gold mining operations.

"This takes the mercury program in Nevada to the next level," Fields said. "It builds upon the successes that we've already achieved."

Environmentalists said the proposal appears to be a step in the right direction.

"I'm glad that Nevada is acknowledging the need for a more robust program. They deserve kudos for that," said Justin Hayes of the Idaho Conservation League, which had threatened to sue the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency over the issue.

But Hayes expressed frustration that environmentalists were excluded from recent discussions between NDEP and the mining industry concerning proposed regulations.

"We've been very frustrated with how closely NDEP has been working with the mining companies responsible for this mercury pollution and with their unwillingness to work as closely with us," Hayes said. "This smacks of a sweetheart deal."

Similar sentiment was expressed by Glenn Miller, a University of Nevada, Reno environmental scientist who serves on the board of the conservationist Great Basin Mine Watch.

"What they did is work out a deal with the industry and left everyone else high and dry," Miller said. "It seems this is only a repeat of what they too often do."

Mercury is released from gold mining operations during roasting and other refining operations used to extract gold from ore. It rises into the air and can travel great distances before settling to the ground and water.

In its most toxic form, mercury can be readily absorbed by living tissues and move up the food chain from fish to humans. Mercury affects the central nervous system and in some cases can irreversibly damage the brain, with children and developing fetuses most at risk.

The scope of mercury pollution associated with Nevada gold mines wasn't discovered until the EPA rules changed in 1998 to add the substance to the list of toxic discharges required to be reported. At the time, Nevada mines released more than 10 tons of mercury into the air, the EPA said. That made the state the No. 1 emitter of mercury at the time.

Through the installation of smokestack scrubbers and similar technology under the voluntary program, the amount of mercury released has dropped to 3,755 pounds, a reduction of 82 percent, the EPA said.

The new program should continue successful reduction in emissions, said Wayne Natri, administrator of EPA's Pacific Southwest office.

"We believe the new program will build on those earlier successes," Natri said.